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**The Iowa Blind History Archive
History of Blindness in Iowa - Oral History Project
Interview with [Name]
Conducted by [Name]
[Date]
Transcribed by [Name]**

NOTE: Any text included in brackets [] is information that was added by the narrator after reviewing the original transcript. Therefore, this information is not included in the audio version of the interview.

**Scott Van Gorp, Age 36, Des Moines, Iowa
Meredith Ferguson
Iowa Department for the Blind, 524 Fourth Street,
Des Moines, Iowa 50309
7-11-2011**

Meredith Ferguson: This is Meredith Ferguson, and I'm interviewing Scott Van Gorp. Is that how you pronounce it?

Scott Van Gorp: Yeah.

Ferguson: Okay. The date is July 11, 2011. The interview is taking place at the Iowa Department for the Blind at 524 Fourth Street in Des Moines, Iowa. The time is 2:07 p.m. Scott, could you please state your full name and the city and state where you currently live?

Van Gorp: Sure. Scott Van Gorp, and Des Moines, Iowa.

Ferguson: All right. And, your age, if you're comfortable with that.

Van Gorp: I'm sorry?

Ferguson: Your age?

Van Gorp: Age, oh I'm sorry, okay, 36.

Ferguson: Thirty-six, okay.

Van Gorp: I had to think about that for a second.

Ferguson: The purpose of this interview is that it will become part of the Iowa Department for the Blind's History of Blindness in Iowa, Oral History Project. Scott, do I have your consent to record this interview?

Van Gorp: You do.

Ferguson: Great. Okay, we'll go ahead and get started. Scott, where were you born and raised?

Van Gorp: Born in Iowa City, and raised; the first few years of my life in a little bitty town in Jasper County, Sully, Iowa. From there, at around age six or seven moved to Pella, the land of many tulips and lots of pastry.

Ferguson: Good pastry, right here.

Van Gorp: Yes, yes. Oh, you haven't had any yet. Oh, you are missing out. So, then lived there all through high school, and from there attended Northwestern College way up in the Northwest corner of Orange City, Iowa for four years, and then moved down to Des Moines, and been here ever since.

Ferguson: Okay. Before I get into a couple of questions that are going to have some tangents with that, but what was the cause of your blindness, and at what age did you become blind?

Van Gorp: Blind since birth. I believe they've got it reclassified now. It was RLF, I believe it's retinopathy of prematurity now.

Ferguson: Say that again.

Van Gorp: Retinopathy of prematurity. It was RLF, is what they had it classified as before.

Ferguson: Okay. Could you maybe, you don't have to go into too much detail, but maybe explain what that is?

Van Gorp: Pretty, I mean, there's not much detail to it.

Ferguson: Okay.

Van Gorp: I was born three months premature, and as a result of too much oxygen, it caused retinal detachment, and it was basically it. I mean, you know 100% oxygen level will do that. I know they've gotten that under control since the 50's, 60's, 70's, and 40's, when it was real prevalent. In the 80's it started slowing down, and now you don't see it too much.

Ferguson: Oh, okay.

Van Gorp: You probably had a few more cases in here like that.

Ferguson: Yeah, now that...I don't think; the name didn't ring a bell, but like that oxygen.

Van Gorp: Retrolental fibroplasia was the term at the time, but like I said, now they have it re-classed.

Ferguson: Yeah, but your story sounds familiar with some of the other interviews that we've done.

Van Gorp: Sure.

Ferguson: Okay. Can you talk a little bit about your educational background, like living in Pella, going to high school?

Van Gorp: Yeah. Living in Pella, I was really, really fortunate in that when my parents divorced and we moved to Pella, the one thing that my mom did not want to have happen was for me to go to the Braille school. She wanted to make sure that I was in a public school setting all the way through. I spent a year and one-half, kindergarten and half of my first grade year, in the Lynnville Sully School District. And, at that time there was talk of, maybe, moving me to Vinton at that point. And mom said absolutely not. We're going to move to Pella, and that's where he is going to be. And, I mean, I did spend a couple of summers in the early 80's in Vinton at the summer school program. And, I was thankful for that, but mostly thankful for the public school setting, and the experiences I had there.

I graduated from Pella Community High School in 1994. From there, and this would technically fall under educational and other things, but from there I actually came to the Department for the Blind Orientation Center in 1994. I finished up in early, well, late spring of 1995. From there, in June, after I graduated from the program, I actually worked through the summer as. Well, actually in communications doing both the Braille and the keyboarding. One of the teachers who is still here, it is my understanding she is still here anyway, she ended up taking some continuing education out-of-state, and the then Director of the Center, Mary Clarke, needed someone to fill in, and she asked me to do it, and I was more than happy to do it. I was actually filling in for Rebecca Swainey.

Ferguson: Yes, she is still here.

Van Gorp: I thought she was still here. I thought she was. And so, I ended up being Rebecca for a summer.

Ferguson: Oh, okay.

Van Gorp: And, from there I went to Northwestern College in Orange City, with a double major in music and communications. I graduated in 1999, and did an internship there, actually did an internship at, it's now Iowa Public Radio.

Ferguson: Okay.

Van Gorp: At the time, the public radio stations were still independent, so I was working with the folks at WOI in Ames, working with their fundraising coordinator up there, he was also part of the ISU Foundation. And, did a couple of report projects for him, and did a report project for the General Manager of WOI. So, those were my internship things dealing strictly with radio, looking at fundraising trends, and then looking at Arbitron ratings, which is the radio equivalent of the Nielsen ratings; so looking at listenership throughout the day during a specific period. So, I had a chance to do that, and then that finished out my communications degree, and the music degree I already had there weren't any internships involved with that. That was basically the extent of high school and college. So, bachelor's in those two degrees, and that was basically it.

Ferguson: Yeah. Music; do you play an instrument, or do you sing?

Van Gorp: Yeah, well, actually I did both. The music degree in college was actually on euphonium, which is commonly called a baritone horn.

Ferguson: Yes.

Van Gorp: You've heard of it.

Ferguson: Yes, I was in band.

Van Gorp: Impression, impression. I like it. I started out playing a little piano, but piano wasn't really my strong suit. Euphonium was. I also did some valve trombone work in a high school jazz band with the award winning Pella High Jazz 1. Oh yeah, oh yeah. Did some jazz championships with them, and some marching band championships with them, and then I was actually a percussionist on the sideline for field competitions. So, I've done some brass, done some percussion, have done some vocals. I'm actually a drummer in a local southern gospel group here in town. I was doing some work in a worship band as a percussionist and singer, but the church that I was going to is no longer there. So, they are closing this summer, as a matter of fact. So, we'll kind of see how that goes and where my talents end up at that point.

Ferguson: Yeah.

Van Gorp: So, I've done a little bit of everything.

Ferguson: You have. That's awesome actually.

Van Gorp: And, the music major was in theory and composition. Not so much on the performance side, although I probably could have done that, because I did have to do a recital my junior year. Music majors, we have a lot we have to do.

Ferguson: You sure do.

Van Gorp: Balance that with a communications major, and I was a very, very busy guy.

Ferguson: You were.

Van Gorp: I was also involved with the college radio station. My freshman year, I was basically an on air personality working with one of my roommates. The other three years, my sophomore year I was actually on the Board of Directors as music director. Kind of had to handle, you know, work with some of the station music selection and do some things like that, just general board duties. And, then my junior and senior year I was radio station general manager. So, I had a chance to be basically at the helm of the whole thing, working with the station staff and board of directors, and also being the station faculty adviser; running all the day-to-day station operations and conducting the meetings of the board of directors and all that. So, that was a lot of what I did in my spare time in college, which, probably you are aware there isn't that much spare time.

Ferguson: Yeah. I can see that.

Van Gorp: So, that was pretty much a 24/7 job for me. It was work-study, but it was a 24/7 job, and there were some interesting situations that I ended up getting involved with personnel-wise that I had to...One of the things that we had to do was monitor and make sure that the station staff were doing what they needed to on the air. And, if they weren't, it was my responsibility at that point to run out of my dorm room down to the studio and take care of it. So, that created its own set of challenges, but, you know, we were able to get that going. Along with that, I had some news writing classes.

I had to take some broadcast journalism classes, and one of the interesting parts with that was getting to cover the elections, would have been the 1998 elections, general election. And so, I had a chance to go to a few polling places and do some interviews, and go down to the county election office and do some interviews down there. So, that was interesting, that and a couple of other writing assignments I did for the Sioux County Sheriff's Office. So, yeah, it was definitely interesting.

Ferguson: Yeah. I guess, I kind of want to backtrack a little bit and kind of get your impression, or any stories of how...Did your blindness play into any of this at all? I guess, if you ran across, well, for lack of a better term, like discrimination going through school. Like, even back to high school and then in college. Did you experience any problems?

Van Gorp: Sure. Fortunately, I guess you could say I was a trail blazer in the Pella School System. I was the first blind student going through, but they were very, very

accommodating. They worked very, very well with the Area Education Agency. At the time, I believe it was in Johnston, then moved to Ankeny after that, if I remember correctly, Area 11 here. I don't, if there are any, how many AEA's they even have anymore; but good working relationship with them. Good teachers, both in the public school system, and through the AEA. I got great Braille instruction. If it weren't for Braille, I wouldn't be where I'm at right now, I guarantee that, and that is critical. I got a lot of my orientation and mobility training there. Of course, that expanded once I got into the Orientation Center, but the main framework was there.

Ferguson: Who taught you Braille, the Braille skills?

Van Gorp: Oh, started out I had several TVI's at the time.

15:00

Ferguson: Okay.

Van Gorp: Caroline Rasmussen, who unfortunately is no longer living. She was killed in a car accident. And, between her and Doris Willoughby, is probably a name that you've heard throughout the circles. And, they were the two big Braille instructors that I had. Mostly, Caroline, but Doris came in later in high school, and by that time, my cane travel skills were good, but she was instrumental in making sure that I continued that. So, I mean, those were probably the two biggest TVI influences that I had. There were a couple in between, but they were short-term, and I actually got to work with Doris Willoughby twice, when I was very

young, and then later on in high school, she ended up picking up the workload for the AEA down in Pella at the time. So, that really, you know, was very instrumental, and of course, now she is retired, and has been for a couple of years. Actually, I had a chance to see her at the NFB National Convention in Dallas last year, so that was really cool. That was really cool. You know, I wasn't sure if I would run into her there, but I did. She remembered me, and vice versa. So, that was great. Discrimination-wise, not so much with the school system, but I mean, you're going to have especially in late elementary, junior high and high school, you're going to get that from the kids.

Ferguson: Sure.

Van Gorp: Unfortunately, that was unavoidable. So, I can't say I wasn't bullied around a little bit; I was. But, I don't care who you are, as a kid that age you're going to run into some of that. So, I just attributed, you know, some of that is blindness related, and, but a lot of that was just being a kid. You know, I didn't get so much of that in my neighborhood, because my siblings, you know, pretty much told them who I was and what I was about, you know, and all of that. And so, that wasn't a big deal. You know from some of the others in school, yeah, I had it, but some of them are probably now my best friends.

Ferguson: Okay. You mentioned siblings. Do you have older siblings or younger?

Van Gorp: Younger, I'm the oldest.

Ferguson: Okay, so did...Was there any kind of difference in family dynamics because you were blind? I mean, I know you mentioned mom was really adamant about you staying in the public schools. Do you know why she felt that way?

Van Gorp: I never really asked her, but I think that her feeling was that I needed to be in mainstream society. I think that was the biggest thing. I think she knew that I had the best chance of success as mainstream all the way through, and I personally, I think she was right. Yes, I did have some of the experiences at the Braille school. And, I was glad to have those in summer school, but mainstream was definitely the best route for me. Now, is that going to be the best route for everybody, not necessarily, and of course, now we know what's going on with the Braille school nowadays, and the inevitable closure, in some way new restructuring of the vision services in the school system. I have been keeping up on what's going on, especially now that a portion of their roof was taken off last night. Yeah, Vinton just got leveled. A lot of damage out there from the storms, but anyway, that's kind of out of the realm of this.

Ferguson: That's okay. Why do you think it was the best route for you?

Van Gorp: It gave me the experiences, especially in high school, going out and working a summer job. Going out and hanging with friends. I mean, I had...Once my friends were able to get driver's licenses, I was able to stay out and do the pizza, and do the late night McDonald's runs, and do the

bowling until one or two in the morning on the weekend; go out there and just get out in the community.

Ferguson: So, your social life really didn't suffer at all. You didn't feel kind of...

Van Gorp: Not really, no. You know, I ended up with a fantastic group of friends, and once they were able to drive, I mean, it was great. I mean, you know, I'll take you, no problem; no here, let's go out and let's go grab a bite to eat, and let's go hit the bowling lanes; or you know, go to a baseball game or whatever the case might be. I mean, sure I had my chores at home I had to do, and I made sure that those responsibilities were met first. But other than that, I was able to go out and do that kind of stuff.

Ferguson: That's refreshing to hear, because there have been a couple of interviews that we've done, where people either going to Vinton or going into public school, mainstream, or whatever you want to call it, hadn't had such great experiences. It's like...the social aspect of it.

Van Gorp: Well, and that's why I'm glad I was able to stay in mainstream, because socialization with blind people is great. Don't get me wrong. I think it's the best thing in the world, but at the same time, you've got to be able to get out in the community and make it work, because ultimately, it's society that you're going to be interacting with the most, and not the blind. And, if you're going to be able to go out there and get your education or get into the workforce, you've got to be able to interact, and interact well.

Ferguson: And, you don't feel that your education was lacking in any way. I mean, were certain things or parts of it more difficult, such as getting the proper materials?

Van Gorp: For the most part, I mean, obviously education then was different from education today, and the tools of blindness then were different from the tools of blindness now. Like I said, Braille...If I was not able to get the textbooks in Braille, we actually had someone employed in the school district who did the Braille, by hand I might add; we're not talking braille embossers, we're talking Perkins Brailler here. She would sit there and Braille out the worksheets, Braille off the assignments. Note taking, a lot of it I did with a slate and stylus, I did some with Perkins Brailler, and later on with the Braille 'N Speak. You've probably heard about those.

Ferguson: Yes.

Van Gorp: The very earliest note takers out there were, you know, were the Braille 'N Speaks. And so, I did a lot of work with that. Access to computers was a little bit limited. Most of the typing I had to do was on either a manual or an electric typewriter. At that point, screen reading technology particularly for the McIntosh, which is what most of the schools were using, and my understanding is that most of them still are, really wasn't where it is today. Apple was behind and Windows was something that people really weren't into at the time. Of course, we had the DOS screen readers and what-not, but I really didn't get into that until I was in college. At that point, that's when I picked up a lot of my system tech skills. The DOS environment first, and then

moved on to JAWS For Windows from there. Refreshable Braille came later.

Ferguson: Okay.

Van Gorp: And then, of course, as note takers evolved, I ended up evolving with it. I've got a PacMate now, and now as far as a lot of what I do, you know, it's just simple note taking. I'll do it either in Braille or I'll do it on my iPhone. I don't have a wireless keyboard for it yet, but that's coming. I'll be getting one of those. Yes, I'm part of the iPhone crowd. I know there are several in this building.

Ferguson: There are, yes. There are several.

Van Gorp: I know there are several in this building. I know of at least one, two, four, maybe six or seven.

Ferguson: Yes.

Van Gorp: Maybe close to ten.

Ferguson: So, you're very happy with how technology has evolved and find it a very usable tool?

Van Gorp: I am. Do I see it as an end-all, be-all, absolutely not. There's no substitute for Braille, and there's no substitute for any of the alternative techniques of blindness. Without them, you're not going to survive. There's just no way.

Ferguson: So, you started to say that you really believe in laying the groundwork, always having those basic orientation skills?

Van Gorp: If you don't have the basics, you have nothing to build from. And, that is what I was taught, and that is what I taught, especially that summer that I was here, and that is what I firmly believe. Without the real basics, there's nowhere to go.

Ferguson: Was that something you were taught from the beginning of your education, or was that something that you picked up going to summer school in Vinton, or something that you really have learned coming to the Orientation Center?

Van Gorp: It all started with the itinerant teachers, back in elementary school. It was built upon in Vinton, and was really enforced, really re-enforced once I got here. And, it's something that I, to this day, if there's a blind person out there talking with me and I see that they don't have those skills and techniques, I'm going to do what I can to at least give them a little bit of a nudge and say, "Hey, you really need to look at this, because if you don't you're not going to be as successful in modern day society."

Ferguson: What types of other skills did you learn at the summer school program in Vinton?

Van Gorp: At that point, that was my first real experience with getting with other blind folks. We go back to socialization there. Working with the very earliest talking,

the very earliest accessible computers started there. A lot of the recreational things I picked up there. I was taking swimming lessons at home, but I got a chance to actually swim with other blind folks, and really see how it's done, you know, which was a great thing. Bowling, that's where I got my start in bowling was at Vinton. I'm not going to say that I'm the best bowler in the world, but I manage, okay.

Ferguson: All right, sure.

Van Gorp: I've got my own equipment to prove it. I hold my own. Braille instruction, of course, was one of the things back then it was still deeply engrained. We're talking early 80's. And, you know, of course, the cane travel, and you know, just some of the things like that.

Ferguson: Okay.

Van Gorp: I considered myself to be a good traveler in public school, and a good traveler in Vinton, but my travel skills really came into their own when I got here.

Ferguson: That leads nicely into my next question. You attended the Orientation Center here at the Department, was it in 1994 to 1995?

Van Gorp: Yeah.

Ferguson: What impact did that have on your life? Did it really change or re-enforce your attitude in any way, kind of, how you approach things or approach life in general?

Van Gorp: It really did re-enforce things. I was able to have the experiences in shop that unfortunately, when you're in a public school setting, it's more difficult when you're in a class of 20 or 25 students. The shop teacher's got to keep track of everybody else, plus you. So, the shop experiences were good. Cooking; that was one thing that I had been struggling with. So, Home Ec. here was a blessing; big time.

30:00

Van Gorp: Especially by the time I got to the seven course meal. And, travel; I needed the exposure to a larger city, so especially since I knew pretty much after college I was going to probably end up here anyway, because this is where the jobs are. And so, travel here was great; fantastic experiences, some not so fantastic. Took out, you know, chipped a couple of teeth on a pole over at Sixth and Grand.

Ferguson: Did you really?

Van Gorp: Yes, I did.

Ferguson: Oh.

Van Gorp: Ended up getting crowns because of it, but that's okay, you know. So be it. That's a part of it. You're going to have good travel experiences, and you're going to have bad travel experiences. You know, you've probably taken some Orientation before you started here.

Ferguson: I took a little bit, yes.

Van Gorp: Sleep shades and the whole nine yards, right?

Ferguson: Yes.

Van Gorp: So, you know what I'm talking about, okay?

Ferguson: Yeah, I have.

Van Gorp: I didn't think I was not preaching to the choir here, because I know that one of the prerequisites here is you've got to take at least a little bit of Orientation.

Ferguson: Yes, I took a little, yeah. I have a brief idea of what you're talking about.

Van Gorp: What's that?

Ferguson: I have a brief idea of what you're talking about.

Van Gorp: Yeah. No, you know, and that's great. As long as you have a little bit to build on, you're fine. You're absolutely fine. The computer skills, again, this was something that was expanded upon here. Braille, I mean, they already knew I was a great Braille reader the way I was, contracted and un-contracted, so there wasn't really much to do there. I spent most of my time on the computer side of things, and the technology side of things, which was definitely a blessing. Wood chopping, oh yeah, oh yeah. Been there, done that. I met my future wife here.

Ferguson: Did you, really?

Van Gorp: Yes.

Ferguson: That seems to happen quite often.

Van Gorp: It does. We weren't dating though. She was dating somebody else. Everybody thought we were dating, but we weren't. But no, it wasn't until after college that I got together with her, officially, and we've been married now for six years this past Saturday.

Ferguson: Oh, well, congrats.

Van Gorp: Thank you. No kids yet.

Ferguson: No kids. Okay.

Van Gorp: Someday, perhaps. And so, you know, that was that kind of setup that really, you know, met her here, hadn't met her before, didn't know anything about her until then.

Ferguson: Did you have much experience with dating before then?

Van Gorp: Not much. And part of that was because I was so busy with my other stuff, especially with my extracurricular stuff; band and that kind of thing. So, I just was busy doing stuff. And, then for a portion of my junior high and my freshman year in high school, I was also involved with wrestling. Well, music kind of took over and I realize that's where my passion was, because I wasn't cut out for sports.

Ferguson: But you gave it a shot.

Van Gorp: I gave it a shot, that's right. I gave it a shot, and that's the critical thing.

Ferguson: Yeah.

Van Gorp: You've got to at least have the experience, and so, you know, I wasn't the best wrestler in the world, but you know, like I said I gave it a shot, and that's what counts.

Ferguson: Exactly. Was there anything you learned here at the Department, either during the Orientation Center or with your experience, like, afterwards that you haven't really run across before. Like, did anything new happen?

Van Gorp: Well, shop like I said. Shop was definitely a new experience. My night stand is still together to this day. It is still together to this day. I still have it, and the cooking, you know, the alternative techniques in cooking; I really didn't have much of that before. So, I didn't do a whole lot of cooking at home, you know, until after that. In college, I spent all four years in the dorm, so I really...There really wasn't a whole lot of off campus housing opportunities in a small town like that, and I really didn't want to do that, because I wanted to make sure that I was where the technology access was.

Had high speed Internet out in the community been a little bit more prevalent like it is today, I probably would have lived off campus and probably would have been very successful. But, at the time I just had to be, you know, where the opportunities were. And, as general manager of a radio station, I thought, personally, that I needed to be on

campus in case something were to happen, especially since I had the keys to the facility. So, I could make sure that if I needed to get there, I could get there in two minutes or less. You know, it was a real small campus, so you could get almost anywhere within two to five minutes, usually.

But, you know, as far as experiences here at the center, definitely the shop, definitely the Home Ec. The blindness socialization, getting out there and knowing the philosophy that it is all right to be blind, it's respectable, it's what you are, and it's who you're going to be, so work with it. You know, use it as an asset. That got started here.

Ferguson: Would you say that's a belief that the blind community in general, or other blind people that you socialize with, is that something that a lot of people share?

Van Gorp: There are some that do. There are some that don't. It's a mixed bag. It really depends on who I'm with. I can definitely tell the ones who don't have that view. They don't have the self-confidence, and they don't have the attitude; that yes, I can go out there and make a difference. You know, there are a lot of us that I'm with that do share that attitude, and are consequently both involved with similar consumer group and what-not. And, that's another thing that got my exposure to consumer groups in this state and in this country, and I was able to come away with a decision, you know, one over another. Not that I think that one consumer group is better than another. They certainly do things a different way. You know, each has their place. Each has their strengths and each has their weaknesses, one consumer group a little bit more than another, but.

Ferguson: Just to be clear, what consumer groups are you talking about?

Van Gorp: I'm referring to the National Federation of the Blind and the American Council of the Blind.

Ferguson: Okay. I figured that's who you were, but for the listeners, who don't.

Van Gorp: Yeah, that's perfectly fine. You know, I wasn't sure if you wanted me to mention it or not, so I appreciate you steering me back there.

Ferguson: Actually, if you're comfortable with it, would you mind sharing how you came to choose the one over the other; which one you belong to?

Van Gorp: Which one, I am a Federationist.

Ferguson: Okay.

Van Gorp: And, my main reason for that is they tend, the Federation, tends to align more with the independence philosophy, with the respectability philosophy, with the idea that if blind people are going to succeed in this country, it is up to the blind to make it happen. Society is not going to do it for us. You know, handouts--no. I don't buy any of that at all. If the blind are going to achieve equality, it is up to us to make it happen. Now, yes, we're going to have to work with various legislative entities, political entities and what-not. Yes, that's what it's going to take to get things done, but at the same time, we have to take the initiative.

Ferguson: Is that, I'm just kind of reflecting on everything you've told me so far. Is that an attitude that you had from, I guess, from the very beginning when you were going through elementary, middle school and high school?

Van Gorp: I didn't realize what it was at the time, but I've always been a fighter. I've always been the type of person to go after what I want and find a way to get there. My family will be the first to tell you that I'm about the most stubborn person you're ever going to find. Sometimes that's a benefit, and sometimes it'll shoot me in the foot. I'm not going to deny that, but it is what it is. And, you know, molding that with the NFB's philosophy just made me a more well-rounded person.

I am proud to say that I am a member of the Des Moines Chapter, but I am also Secretary of the Iowa affiliate. So, I work very, very closely with Michael Barber and Curtis Chong, Tai Blas and the others on the Board. And, I'm proud of it. I was originally looking for just a board position, but Michael called me and said, "How would you like to be Secretary?" I said, "Give me the weekend to think about it." Because that wasn't exactly what I was looking for, but I'm glad I'm where I'm at. It's been a good springboard for me. I've also worked with Peggy Chong on the Saturday school activities here at the Department for the NFB Chapter meetings, helping the kids in Saturday School work to better their own blindness skills, which is something that they don't necessarily get in the public school system. We try to work on other things, such as re-enforcement of Braille, cane travel and the like, but we also work with things, such as how-to...Well, we've done tactile maps, worked with kids

on map reading, we've done board games, card games, worked a little bit on that. And, we've worked on going to the Farmer's Market, and telling the difference between a cucumber and a zucchini.

Ferguson: Okay.

Van Gorp: You know, just different experiences that they're not necessarily going to get in the public school system; how to thread a needle and do some different things like that. So, that's been another good piece I've been able to do with the local chapter and the affiliate. So, different things like that.

Ferguson: Kind of going back to your college years a little bit, when you were super-involved. Was there any, did you ever run into any problems with professors or people on campus taking your classes?

Van Gorp: What?

Ferguson: Did you ever run into any problems with professors?

Van Gorp: Not really. All of the textbooks I was either able to get readers for, or they were available on cassette. Of course, in college you're not going to see as much Braille. E-text books were not as big in the mid-90s, and late 90's as they are today. Had I had access to textbooks, it would have been wonderful, but then we would have had a whole other set of accessibility challenges with e-text books, because not every e-text book out there is accessible right

now, and that's one of the things that the NFB is working with.

Did I have any issues with this as far as registering for classes or taking classes? Not really. You know, I wasn't denied any classes or anything like that. Testing, I was able to take my tests. I did have to take them outside the classroom, but that's only because the person who was reading the test was also the writing center director. And at that time, I only had; it wasn't a case where I had JAWS installed on the college network. I could only have it on my dorm computer, and at that time, one or two other computers. So, it was a matter of where the computers were that I had the technology installed.

Ferguson: How did you take the tests? You had a reader, and did they write down your answers? Did you dictate your answers, or how did that work?

Van Gorp: It depended on what it was.

45:00

Van Gorp: The multiple stuff I basically had them right the answers on the answer sheets, because that was quicker. As far as any essay questions or anything like that, those I wrote out and printed off, and turned them into the professors that way.

Ferguson: Yeah, okay.

Van Gorp: And that worked out very, very well. Term papers, there weren't any issues with that. You know, of

course, a lot of the library materials, but again, it was not again something that was totally digitized like they are today. I'm assuming you're a college student now or have been?

Ferguson: I graduated about a year ago in May, so, yeah, a little recently, but.

Van Gorp: So, you know a little bit of what I'm talking about; what we're talking about, the digital revolution, as far as textbooks. I wish I had that, and you know, if I decide to go for a master's or something like that, I probably will have it, you know, in a lot of books.

Ferguson: Yeah. What is your current occupation?

Van Gorp: I am actually a Center Sales and Service Associate for, it was Qwest Communications. It is now a merger with Century Link. You've probably seen the commercials. If you watch any TV, you've seen the commercials with the slinkies and the stairs.

Ferguson: Yes, actually. Okay. I like that, I can make a connection.

Van Gorp: Yes, and it, and that's a part of what that commercial symbolizes is making connections with something that has withstood the test of time. The slinkies, and the stairs, you know, moving from one stage to another.

Ferguson: So, what do you do in your position?

Van Gorp: What I do in my position is take in-bound customer calls, billing questions, new products, new services, upgrades. My present work, I am in the Retention Queue, so if a customer calls in and wants to disconnect, I do my level best to save them, whether it be by restructuring their services a little bit, or finding a new product or service, and I help them out, you know; especially if I've got a customer who wants to cancel their phone line. Well, "Do you have a security system in the house?" "Oh, I didn't think of that." Yeah, you might not want to cancel that phone line, let's do something different with it. Or, hey, let's get you some Internet in that house. What are you doing? You know, and it's a very competitive market, I will tell you that. It's a very competitive market.

Right now we cover the 14 states that were originally in the Qwest territory, but eventually, we'll expand and help cover the other 23 states that are in the Century Link territory, so basically, we've become a company with 37 states, where the...I believe it's the third largest telecommunications provider in the United States, third or fourth, but I want to say third, because I think Century Link was the fourth, and I think we were like fifth or sixth. So, now we're third with the joining of the two companies. And so, that's basically a lot of what I do. Eventually, I want to get into management, but right now, there isn't the spot for me. Eventually, I think there may be, but not right now.

Ferguson: How long have you been in that position?

Van Gorp: I've been with the company for two and one-half years. Before that I was in the Mortgage Industry, which, of course, we know what happened to the mortgage industry.

Pretty much, they closed the call center down that I was in with regards to Citi-Mortgage, and before that I was in the credit card industry. I was working for the Sears Credit Operation out in West Des Moines, then CitiBank bought them out, and so I was working for Citi until April of 2000. Well, then from there I just went straight over to the mortgage side of things. April of 2000, I'm sorry, I meant April of 2005. Yeah, April of 2005, and then I went over to the mortgage industry from April 2005, because it was just before I got married, and started a new job. I worked there until June of '08, and then I came here.

Ferguson: Did you have any problems finding employment once you graduated?

Van Gorp: Once I graduated, no. Actually, before that I worked for four months at EDS selling skin care products, actually. I met Cody; I met Cody Dolinsek from my Orientation Center days. He and I went through the center together, but that's where I met, officially met Bettina, and then we all went over to Sears together, and then when Citi bought them out, then I stayed, and they went elsewhere. And, then Cody was at Qwest for a while, and I came after he was already gone. And, as far as finding employment itself. No, I mean, I knew what kind of positions were out there here in Des Moines, and I knew pretty much where I would have to get my start. Is it ultimately what I'd like to be doing? No, but it's a job, and it keeps me above minimum wage, and it keeps me as part of the roughly 30% of blind folks who are employed, and I'm darn proud of it.

Ferguson: Can you think of any ways that you've seen job opportunities really expand, or kind of drift away currently, since you've been in the market?

Van Gorp: There are obviously a lot more technology jobs out there for the blind. Call centers are probably still the number one job creator for the blind, but you still have your Business Enterprise Program operations. You still have a lot of, I guess this is kind of a new thing, you know, that's starting--eBay. A lot of blind folks are, I think are going to start...You're going to start seeing them being eCommers, and starting their own businesses that way. Is it the ultimate money maker--perhaps, perhaps not, but it's a start. And, you know, it's a start for getting people off the unemployment rolls and into society, and into the community, and making them more productive. Am I for it? Yes. Do I think that there is a lot of work to do? Oh yeah.

Ferguson: I'm kind of looking at my list of questions, and we've covered a lot of ground. Well, you mentioned you're in a gospel group right now, right?

Van Gorp: Um-hum.

Ferguson: Are there any other community activities that you're involved in?

Van Gorp: As a matter of fact, I am a licensed Amateur Radio Operator, and so one of the things with that is not only do you get to do the HAM radio stuff, but you also get to work during severe weather relaying reports back to the weather service. But, one of the cool things is that you also

get a chance to go out in the community and not only work when there are emergency situations, but you get to practice when there aren't emergency situations.

One of the ways that we do that is with the Polk County Amateur Radio Emergency Service. What we do, is we go out to various events and provide communications support. They provided support for the Walk for Air Climb here downtown. Let's see, was that at the Marriott, this last time I think that it was. We also provide support for the State Fair Parade, and the very first event that I was able to help provide support for with another experienced HAM was the dam-to-dam walk, where I was actually stationed at one of the check points over by Birdland and Saylor Road, over by the levies over there. And, what we would basically do, is provide feedback to the net control station as to when runners would go by us, for instance, the first male runners to go by we'd give the numbers on their bibs, and the first wheelchair runners to go by, we would give them. And, then since you know you can't have race organizers everywhere on the course, you can't have police everywhere on the course, and you can't have medics everywhere on the course watching everybody. That's where a lot of times the amateur radio folks are crucial, because we're providing the communications, if there are runners that look to be stressed, or it looks like they're going to have issues, then it's radioed down the course, "Watch for such and such a runner."

Or we had vehicles, work vehicles out on the course where if runners were unable to continue, were unable to complete the course or needed medical attention, then we would have the SAG wagons go and pick them up. Yeah, that's right I said SAG wagons. And, at our check point we

actually did have two female runners go down. So, we had to run over and check on them, and they weren't in the best of shape. We had to give them some transportation out of there. But, that's a lot of times what we do at these events. As a matter of fact, at 7:00 tonight, I'm actually going to stay downtown and do some things downtown. But, at 7:00 tonight I'm going to go to my first Polk County ARES meeting over at 19th and Carpenter. So, I'm going to go get involved with that and do some more work with that. So, that's a lot of the community stuff. I'm probably going to be helping with the Des Moines Marathon and maybe one or two other events this year, and we'll see how things go next year.

Ferguson: Okay. Very nice.

Van Gorp: What else I can get my hands involved with.

Ferguson: Well, you obviously like being very involved and keep busy. Are there any kind of techniques or, I guess, such as labeling-wise that you use in the home to like, well, in Home Ec. for example, and in cooking or labeling other things in the home, or just kind of getting around?

Van Gorp: Braille, a lot of Braille. I know there are some devices, such as the Pen Friend that will do some audio labels and that kind of stuff. Have I gotten into that yet? No. Will I? It wouldn't surprise me if I did, because I mean, those tools are definitely out there, but Braille is the big one. Recipes and that kind of stuff I'll either Braille them or tape them, or look them up on computer or something like that.

Ferguson: Does your wife read Braille really well, too?

Van Gorp: She's not as proficient, but she can do it, and we just make sure it's enough to where we can definitely do it around the house. Out at a restaurant, most of the time I'm the one reading the menu.

Ferguson: Okay.

Van Gorp: You know, if there's a Braille menu available, and if there isn't, by golly, I'm going to make sure there is at some point.

Ferguson: I was just going to ask you if you've run into a lot of instances where you've asked for...

Van Gorp: There are still a lot of restaurants in this town that don't have them. There are a lot that do, don't get me wrong. Especially, here downtown. Of course, that's almost a prerequisite, because what are the students gonna do when, you know, when the day is over? What are the students gonna do? Let's face it, you know, they've gotta go eat somewhere, and unfortunately, a couple of the restaurants that were open after, like Burger King, I think they close after 5:00 now, I think.

Ferguson: Oh wow.

Van Gorp: What's that?

Ferguson: I said, oh wow, I didn't know that.

Van Gorp: Yeah, I think it's 5:00. But if you know in Capitol Square, on the upper level, there's that Mexican place.

Ferguson: Yes.

Van Gorp: Okay, over by the, it was the Kirkwood Hotel, which that was a good coffee shop, too, boy I'm telling you. Of course, it's all now condos, but that Mexican place hasn't always been a Mexican place. It was Stella's Blue Sky Diner forever 'till it closed, and now Stella's out in Urbandale is closed, too, which is too bad. But, that was a big hang out. Burger King was a big hang out. Babe's, when it was Babe's, and then it became Chuck's, it was a big hang out. Coney Island, when it was still open, you know where that's at? I don't know, is the Indian food place still in there, or have they done something different with that?

Ferguson: I actually can't remember.

1:00:00

Van Gorp: Because the Coney Island closed down and that was an Indian place. I don't know what it is now over by Hawkeye Pantry.

Ferguson: Yeah, I'm not sure.

Van Gorp: Hawkeye is still there, of course, and that was, you know, on Sundays that's where we'd get a lot of our snacky stuff, of course, on weekends. A lot of the Court Avenue stuff was still around, I mean, it's changed. Nacho Mama's, of course, is now Legends. But, a lot of that stuff is

still around and still open. Java Joe's, of course, if you're a coffee drinker.

Ferguson: I am a coffee drinker. I love my coffee. When you were here at the Center, did you and the other students, did you stay downtown a lot? Or did you travel outside in and around other parts?

Van Gorp: A lot of us stayed downtown. It just really depended on what we were in the mood for. Of course, a lot of stuff out to the west of here wasn't here in the 90's. So, there wasn't really a whole lot of places to go, half the time, because, I mean, commercially it just wasn't available. I don't even think we had an Applebee's; which right now, where we live, we're just a hop, skip and a jump from Southeast 14th. So, it doesn't take us much to get to an Applebee's, or Okoboji Grill, or any number of places to go over there.

Ferguson: Have a lot more options. Well, I did want to ask about your cane, because I noticed that you use a fold up cane. Why do you go with that kind? Just out of curiosity, because I see the long white cane here a lot.

Van Gorp: The long white cane. I mean, I love the long white cane, don't get me wrong. And you know, I've got one, but there are just times when I find a folding cane works a little better, especially if I am knowing that I'm going to be in a small space. When you get two, three, four blind people in a car, you have a tendency to tangle up canes a lot, and I personally don't like to do that. Do I like the principle of the long white cane? Absolutely. The long white cane is what

got me started, and I'll live and die by the long white cane, but there are just times when a folding cane works so much better.

Ferguson: Okay.

Van Gorp: You know, and it's definitely a personal preference. I've actually had dogs before. I've actually done two black labs. Right now my wife and I are not in a position where we can do it, and if I get one, she wants one too, and we want to make sure that we're in a bigger place that we can do that first. So, right now, it's just not something that we're wanting to do. Someday, perhaps, but I run the gamut as far as mobility aids. I've done the long white cane, and I've done the telescopic, which I don't like the telescopic because you crack them off a bannister so easily. The folding canes; this is actually different than some of the aluminum ones that are out there. This one is actually graphite. So, that's kind of the story of the folding cane. I used telescopic for years, and years, and years, and I kept breaking them and toward the end, I'm like, okay they're not made the way they used to be, and I've got to do something else.

Ferguson: Can you briefly explain the telescopic for listeners?

Van Gorp: It was basically five or six sections of what amounts to PBC pipe or plastic, a carbon fiber really, and they would just telescope up and down. And, they were an NFB product, and I know NFB has gone to now some other folding canes that I'm going to check out and see what

they're about; see what I think of them. But, the telescoping canes, like I say, the major drawback with them is you don't get as much information from your concrete, or your carpet or whatever. And, they crack off a bannister so easily.

Ferguson: Have you always used a cane?

Van Gorp: Have I always used a cane? Yes, I've always had a cane, and I've always used one.

Ferguson: Okay.

Van Gorp: Of course, in my elementary and junior high years, it's like why am I carrying this thing, you know how kids are? They don't want...You've got that rebellious stage going on.

Ferguson: I was just about to ask you if you carried it a lot going through like middle school and high school.

Van Gorp: I did. Did I want to necessarily? Come on, I was a teenager. Why would I want to look different?

Ferguson: Yeah, I was just going to ask you, was it really because of the stigma that the cane had, or?

Van Gorp: I think so, at the time I think so. Looking back on it, should I have carried it around more? Oh absolutely, but hey, I'm 15-16 and I know it all, you know. Let's face it. You were probably the same way, too. You know, you're 15 and you think you know everything there is to know about the world. Well, you don't.

Ferguson: Okay. Is there anything else that has come up that you'd like to add?

Van Gorp: Not that I can really think of. Well, I guess the one thing would probably have to do with the Library services here. I always had the Library services going all the way through school. Of course, like I said, elementary school and middle school, and high school I relied on the AEA for all the textbook side of things, but of course, the Library did all my leisure stuff. You know, I was in the circulation system, mostly braille, some audio, but mostly Braille. Through my high school years I also served on the, and even into the Orientation Center years, I also served on the Library Consumer Advisory Committee here. So, I got to see the other side of the Library as well; what really makes this Library tick. I was there when we worked on the initial stages of the Prison Braille Program, and the Online Public access Catalog, and the infancy of Newsline, NFB Newsline. So, I was here for all of those developments.

And then after that, of course, it was the Instructional Material Center here at the Library. That did help me through college working with Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic, which is now Learning Ally, it just went through a name change. Actually, when I went it was Recording for the Blind, and then it was Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic, and now it's Learning Ally. So, I've been through all of those changes, too.

Still a Library user; I do a lot of digital downloading now, you know, with the Braille and Audio Reading Download Service, and Web-Braille. I've used that. I know they're going to be incorporating that and BARD together.

So, I mean from a service standpoint, I've done just about everything there is with the agency--Orientation Center, the Library, the Instructional Materials Center, Aids and Devices, Vocational Rehabilitation. I mean, except for BEP, I've touched just about every facet of this agency.

Ferguson: Well, good.

Van Gorp: Which means I've basically touched just about every facet of blindness in the state of Iowa.

Ferguson: Yeah, that's a good way to put it. Just kind of as a closing statement, are there any challenges that you've faced that you'd like to, I guess, give advice for or share with other blind people and other listeners in general, really?

Van Gorp: Just know who you are, know what you want to become, and know how you're going to get there. If you know those three elements, you'll be successful. And, also know that there are many, many blind people that have gone ahead of you, and we're here to help. I mean, if there's a way to make something happen, it'll happen. If there's a way to accomplish a daily living task, rest assured that blind folks have done it before, and there are people who will be willing to step out and help you achieve whatever it is that you're going to try and achieve. You know, just have the confidence to know who you are, and know where you're going, and know how you're going to get there.

Ferguson: Okay. Do you have anything else to add?

Van Gorp: Not that I can really think of. I think that basically sums it all up.

Ferguson: Okay, well, I'll go ahead and shut it off. Thank you very much for this interview.

Van Gorp: You're welcome. You're very, very welcome, been my pleasure.

**1:10:17
(End of Recording)**

**Jo Ann Slayton
8-8-2011**